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ABSTRACT

President Bush's National Education Goals for the year 2000 include increasing the percentage of students graduating from high school, increasing the percentage of dropouts who return later to complete a high school degree or its equivalent, and closing the gap in graduation rates between minority group students and White students. Census figures indicate that the overall dropout rate increased between 1968 and 1989, and that the school completion rates for Hispanic American students and Native American students lag far behind the rates of African American students and White students. Student engagement with school has emerged as the single most important factor in dropout prevention and school completion. The following categories of dropout prevention program characteristics are essential to promoting student engagement: (1) relevance of school; (2) academic success; (3) students' positive experience of the school environment; and (4) school accommodation to outside factors. In addition, a successful dropout prevention program must include clear school completion goals, which must be regularly monitored, and district and school accountability. Long-term improvements in school completion rates will require both school improvement and improvements in larger social problems, such as health care, housing, unemployment, and job discrimination. A list of 13 references is appended. (FMW)

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ERIC DIGEST

MEETING THE GOALS OF SCHOLL COMPLETION

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DIGEST

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MEETING THE GOALS OF SCHOOL COMPLETION

The President's National Education Goals for the year 2000 include: (a) increasing the percentage of students graduating from high school to at least 90 percent, and the percentage of dropouts who return later to complete a high school degree or its equivalent to 75 percent; and (b) closing the gap in high school graduation rates between American students from minority backgrounds and their non-minority counterparts.

Youth Demographics

Between 1968 and 1989, the proportion of persons aged 16 to 24 in the United States who were not currently enrolled in school and had a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate increased from 84 to 87 percent. The rate for whites changed from 85 to 88 percent, with virtually all of the gain accounted for by females. A major improvement was made by African Americans: from 73 to 86 percent. However, the rate for Hispanic Americans fluctuated around 70 percent with no long-term trend toward improvement.

While African Americans are still completing high school at a lower rate than whites, when adjusted for differences in family background their completion rate is at least equal to that of whites. Lower graduation rates for Hispanic students reflect both lower income and language disparity. Reflecting still other factors, Asian Americans are completing high school at the highest rate for all ethnic/racial groups, while Native Americans complete school at the lowest rate. Finally, while African Americans are the largest minority ethnic/racial group in the United States today, Hispanics will be the largest minority student group by the year 2000. All of these statistics are based on United States of the Census Bureau household surveys and may seriously underestimate the number of persons who have not finished high school. In addition, they do not reflect the fact that the proportion of noncompleters is very much higher in center cities.

School Completion Programs

During the last decade, in the hundreds of dropout prevention and recovery programs now in place, students' engagement in education and school has increasingly emerged as the bottom line of dropout prevention and school completion. Four categories of program characteristics, identified by Natriello, Pallas, McDill, McPartland, and Royster, can be seen as essential to promoting this engagement.

Relevance of school invokes the connection between education and employment that is the most cited reason for concern about school completion rates. Part-time and summer jobs that provide needed income, *if* linked with academic and other social supports, can contribute to persistence in school, especially for students in center cities. Participation of local business and industry partners in these programs, as sponsors, tutors, or mentors, is vital both to provide a valid knowledge and materials base and to involve adults from the work sector in the schools.

Academic success is essential to school completion, but it is also the area in which there is the most disagreement about how the schools should proceed. Studies must be relevant to students' interests, but they should promote higher-order thinking and problem-solving, and they should provide good preparation for further study and employment, not least through science and mathematics, for females as well as for males. Retention in grade greatly increases the likelihood of later dropping out, yet promotion on social grounds alone also puts students at risk. Limited English proficient (LEP) students need to utilize their native language to learn, yet they must strengthen their use of English.

These demands on the schools are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do require major changes from common practice today. Impressive student gains from a number of comprehensive, high-intensity programs in preschool and the elementary grades support increasing early educational investment. At the same time, the transition into middle school, and, even more, the transition into high school, has to be carefully articulated between the sending and the receiving schools. A "corridor" system linking elementary, middle, and high schools is one of the general arrangements being explored. Hands-on activities, cooperative learning, multi-media environments, especially utilizing computers, and independent learning contracts, have been found to be more engaging than conventional workbooks and recitation. To implement these innovations, schools need budget, staff training, and greater involvement of business and industry and higher education institutions.

Students' positive experience of the school environment affects their commitment to school at least as much as the academic curriculum does. Because positive relationships with teachers and with pro-school peers are more difficult to establish in a "large" school (i.e., one with 600 students or more), mini-schools or schools-within-a-school have become more common.

Administrators with positive regard for staff, students, and parents are essential to a safe and responsive environment, as are teachers whose interactions are sensitive to students' and parents' characteristics. Staff, students, and parents working together can explore and celebrate their diversity.

Peer tutoring, and perhaps even more, older students' tutoring and mentoring younger students or pupils in the

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elementary grades, have increased school persistence and achievement of the tutors as much as the tutees. Also student training for and participation in peer-mediated conflict resolution teams have reduced school suspensions.

School accommodation to outside factors that can cause students to drop out is essential. Counselors can help students marshall their own and outside resources. Home outreach can mobilize parents' support for their children's attendance and achievement, as well as throw light on the students' behavior in school. Outreach by school staff, especially teachers and counselors, may demonstrate to alienated parents the school's commitment to their children and promote the parents' valuing of education.

Flexible scheduling and programs outside the regular school hours and months have made it possible for students to combine work and family responsibilities with persisting in school. Finally, coordination between the school and other social agencies is needed to support the welfare of students more generally, but is most blatantly needed where students are homeless—a growing population in the schools.

Goals and Accountability

Relevance of school, academic success, positive relationships in school, and accommodation to outside factors are not separate matters; they need to be coordinated for a school program to substantially reduce dropping out. At the same time, any one of these emphases might provide the leading edge of a program, or a rallying point that gives a program its identity, if the program is actively guided by school completion goals, which staff must regularly monitor.

Effective programs require versatile student record systems to keep track of individual students, to profile how different groups of students are faring, and to transfer records from one school and school system to another.

School districts as well as schools must hold themselves accountable, but there is great variation between schools *within* programs or districts. Thus, teachers and school-level administrators have to be included in the designing of a program in order to fit the program to local needs and to be committed to its outcome. Staff development and differentiated staffing models need to deal with varying teacher quality, burnout, or copout, and alternative certification possibilities. Districts especially can provide significant resources and create accountability frameworks for the individual schools.

Conclusion

The easiest dropout prevention improvement to show is the short-term retention of students on school rosters. Long-term retention or persistence and academic improvement at a rate that can lead to a diploma in a reasonable span of time are objectives that would challenge many schools and districts. However, while efforts in the schools alone might narrow the gap, and the schools are once again asked to take the lead, only by attacking social problems like health, housing, unemployment, and job discrimination on all fronts can the goal of school completion be substantially achieved.

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